



January 2015

## Captured in time

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed>



Part of the [Photography Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

(2015) "Captured in time," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: , 22-27.

Available at: <https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol11/iss11/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Design at VTC Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute by an authorized editor of VTC Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [wchu@vtc.edu.hk](mailto:wchu@vtc.edu.hk).





Exhibition view of Hong Kong  
'94, in front of the office lobby,  
Central Plaza, Wan Chai,  
Hong Kong, 1995

# CAPTURED IN TIME

Photographer and academic Tse Ming Chong's  
visual archive of Hong Kong's rapid development





”

People's understanding of past events is often pieced together through photographs

People say that the camera captures a single moment, but I don't think so. A moment is fleeting and intangible – it can never really be captured.” Perhaps a contradictory thing to hear from a photographer's mouth – but then Tse Ming Chong is not your typical photographer. This good-humoured gentleman is patient with his thoughts, and it is obvious why he makes a good lecturer (he is currently the Head of Department of Design Foundation Studies at the Hong Kong Design Institute).

Initially trained as a photo journalist at the Hong Kong Christian Service Kwun Tong Vocational Training Centre, he was enlightened by his teacher, well-known photographer Cheng Chick Woon, who taught him that

a single photograph has the power to change the world. “It imbued me with a sense of mission,” Tse recalls, “I've always closely followed the daily news and the socio-politics of Hong Kong.” One of his most memorable photographs, which also takes the opening page in his recent photobook *Chronicle*, is Tiananmen. The black and white photo depicts the famous Beijing square, in which a large portrait of Mao Zedong is being lowered to the ground by a large crane, surrounded by onlookers. Tse is very aware of an image's connotations – “People's understanding of past events is often pieced together through photographs,” he writes in his book, “But there is always a discrepancy between the source of the image and its truth, and between the reader's understanding of an image and its associations.”



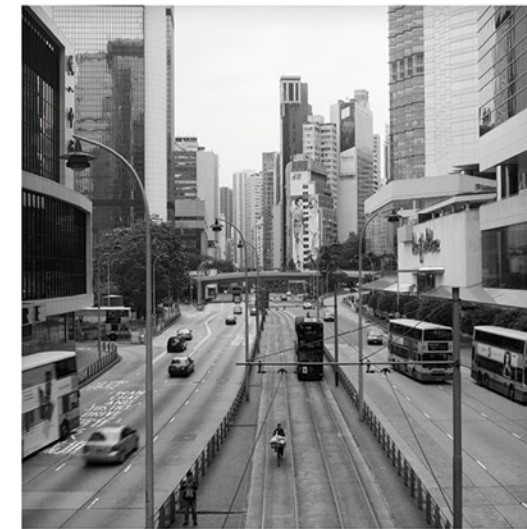
Clockwise from top left: Tram, Hong Kong, 1990; Horse racing will continue in Hong Kong, 1996-1997; Lan Kwai Fong, Central, 1997; Exhibition view in front of office lobby, Central Plaza, Wanchai, Hong Kong, 1994







Clockwise from top: Tsim Sha Tsui Star Ferry Pier, Hong Kong 1997;  
Queensway, Admiralty, Hong Kong, 2008; Star Ferry, Hong Kong, 1995-2007



”

There are always so many things happening in  
our city day by day, but we forget too easily

*Chronicle*, published in late May, is a work of art itself. The level of detail and consideration put into the creation of this book is applaudable. Tse points out the cover slip, which wraps the book, is actually a fold-out poster of his work *Hong Kong Diary '94*, one of his most important photo series. During the 90s when he was living in Peng Chau, Tse would take his daily commute on the ferry to Hong Kong Island. At that time, the Convention Centre in Wanchai was still under construction, and every day he would take a photo of the landfill and construction work. The result is a few hundred images of the city, the blank spaces representing the days that he didn't manage to take a photo. "I made this collection because I wanted to remind myself that I'm creating something out of photography as a medium," Tse explains, "But by photographing every single day, it's a process of learning and practise that reminds me to ask, 'What is photography, and how can I understand it?'"

Carrying his camera wherever he goes, Tse is particularly captivated by street scenes and the behaviour of pedestrians. Silent buildings seem to find a voice through Tse's photography, like the Queen's Pier in Central that was demolished in 2008 despite protests. Scenes of daily life may appear banal, especially in this age of technology where we are bombarded with endless eye-catching images. But provocation is not the aim here. "There are always so many things happening in our city day by day, but we forget too easily," he says, "I want to show that there is not one didactic viewpoint, but multiple views that stem from one event." This sentiment is evoked in his *City Series I* and *II*. Tse wandered around the city, targeting the hundreds of footbridges that link building to building, bypassing the buzzing traffic below. He would stand in the middle of the footbridge and shoot the cityscape, often with the road below

creating a striking, well-balanced vanishing point in the centre. Being well-read in the histories and theories of photography, Tse borrowed the concept of 3D photography. "I am inspired by early stereoview photography that was popular in the 19th century," he explains. "A diptych of two identical monochrome photos would be presented side by side, and you would look at them through a viewing glass to see one 3D image. It was the idea of presenting reality as truthfully as possible. I've changed that concept slightly by creating two different photographs per pair, to suggest that there is no singular viewpoint in society." The first series started out as black and white, to mirror the 19th century vintage style, but in 2014, the controversial Umbrella Movement happened. For this he made a second series entitled *City Series II - The Road*, in the same composition style, but this time in colour. Some of the scenes depict the normally busy roads filled with tents and sleeping protestors, or ghostly empty, devoid of cars or people. Again, presented in diptychs, these photos are extremely powerful, with the cobalt sky at dusk in stark contrast with the warm glow of Harcourt Road under the streetlamps.

Always eager to explore and push the boundaries of photography, Tse has devised a cheeky little flipbook in *Chronicle*. On the bottom left of every other page there is a little icon of a view taken from his home, and Tse invites the reader to flip through it, and see a stop-motion transition from day to night – "It's the development of a year compressed into a single day." Always subtle and thoughtful, Tse Ming Chong's unique photographs are never a straightforward documentary of the urbanscape or political events, but a reflection on the camera as a tool and a mouthpiece for his own thoughts. And more importantly, an open invitation for the viewer to contemplate on city life, and the city in which they exist.